

# Evaluating a Meeting or Program

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Evaluation is measuring past achievement and present need in light of what is hoped for in the future. We are constantly evaluating both ourselves and our life together in the church. Intentional evaluation can provide information to learn from the past and better plan for the future.

## History and Background

Evaluation is not new. The books of Kings evaluate the reigns of the many kings of Judah and Israel.

Paul says “Test yourselves” (2 Corinthians 13:5). The writer of 1 John calls for the testing of others to see whether their gifts are from God (1 John 4:1-3).

The Protestant Reformation began with one of history’s most effective evaluations: Martin Luther posted his “95 Theses” on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, calling for an evaluation of practices of the church to a process of scrutiny and reorder. The United Church of Christ is heir to the Reformation principle that no creation of human beings fulfills the will of God on earth, so we must always be open to new formations and reformations. Given the importance of evaluation, all meetings and programs need evaluation.

## Common Practices

All meetings and programs are reviewed. The review may be in the parking lot or over the phone. We may

say, “Well, we really blew that one,” or “When can we do it again?” Or nothing may be said, but the evaluation can be measured by the lack of attendance at the group’s next meeting. In many places in scripture and churches, actions and deeds of men and women were held up against the highest standards.

All churches have some kind of more intentional evaluation of programs and meetings. One simple method is applause. You can tell when the guest speaker or pianist was appreciated by the level of applause. That will help determine whether or not to invite that person back again. Unless you inquire further, however, you won’t know if people don’t like the pianists playing gospel music or whether they just don’t like that particular pianist. Many churches have found that they need something more precise to help them judge performance against goals, bring events to an end, provide a time for celebrating and suggest new direction and goals for the future.

These churches use a questionnaire, or provide time for response from participants and planners, to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses. Then they agree upon practical steps for corrections and improvements. This evaluation is not a tag on the end of a meeting. It is a process in the beginning, middle and end of the program. It is not conclusive. You evaluate what you have been doing, make recommendations of possible ways to improve, make decisions based on the recommendations and then act.

After you’ve been at it a while, it’s time again for evaluation, and the cycle begins again. Evaluation is continuous. It helps people reflect on their purpose, set common goals and act in accord with those decisions. It is part of a cycle that builds power in a group.

Proceedings can be evaluated at different times and in varied ways. You can measure value verbally or in writing on the spot or at a later time after allowing time for reflection. It can be done by participants or an observer.

## Evaluation and Suggestions

The form and content of evaluation forms depend upon what information you want to know, how much time you have to gather it and how you want to use it. Always evaluate the evaluation form, asking whether it will get the information needed. There is no reason to ask for more information than you are willing to use.

Once the data are collected, evaluation is not complete. On the basis of the data, program planners need to ask what worked and what needs to be changed. Whenever possible, the data and decisions should be shared with those who participated and others in the church who would benefit from the learnings.

Remember that the phrasing of a question can predetermine the answer. Sharpness in the form produces

precision in the response, and can be limiting.

In order to evaluate how well a meeting or program met its goals, its planners must be clear about just what those goals are. Do you intend to build community, as well as introduce an idea or make a decision? You will want to evaluate how well you met all your objectives.

There should be some provision for an open-ended reply.

Here are some ways to evaluate:

- As a committee or task force gathers, ask participants for their expectations—what they “hope for” in the time together. These “hope fors” can be written and displayed on newsprint or chalkboard. At the end of the meeting or event, the “hope fors” can highlight a litany with “Amen” of celebrations for the hopes that are fulfilled.
- At meetings of groups that gather regularly, evaluation can be reserved for the final 15 minutes before adjournment. Post newsprint and let the secretary record responses to these questions:
  - What was good about this meeting?
  - What was accomplished?
  - What could be improved? How?
  - What should we do next time?
- On-the-spot discussion can test how the group is feeling about the meeting. Ask how people are feeling about its length, format and productivity, and the level of participation within the group. Ask in a non-judgmental manner.

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- Written evaluation forms can be distributed at a meeting, collected and tabulated in front of the group for immediate discussion, or the results can be represented and discussed at the next meeting. Similar forms can be distributed at several meetings in a row, after which the group can plan a specified time to deal with issues raised on the forms. They could also be collated and added as an appendix to the minutes. Summaries of the forms should use the exact words of the responders.
- Ask each person, small group or the total group to fill in a form and talk together about what they wrote. A simple form, which can be used individually or in a group, would look like this:

- Weighing scales take quick measures, which can then be averaged. Ask individuals to circle the number that corresponds with their evaluation. Then add the total points, divide by the number who evaluated and find the average.

## Ways to Increase Knowledge and Effectiveness

- Check with your association or conference for printed materials or people who may be available to work with your group or church.

## Questions

- What is the reason for evaluation?
- What are ways your group evaluates its meetings or programs?
- What is one thing you could do that you haven't done?
- How can you evaluate your evaluation form?

Sample Weighing Scale

	Very Well	Well Enough	Poorly	Comments
<b>The meeting was planned</b>	1	3	5	
<b>The guest spoke</b>	1	3	5	
<b>Etc.</b>				

- Tap leaders in the church whose job or expertise relates to planning and evaluation.
- Attend a workshop on planning and evaluation.
- Start simply and with sensitivity. The people you work with are to be valued above any task or process.
- Read **Completing the Circle** by David McMahill (Alban, 2003). Order from United Church of Christ Resources, toll-free, 800-537-3394.

Learnings	Implications for Me	Implications for the Church